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Chair of Assembly Education Committee Introduces Legislation to Improve Schools

SACRAMENTO—Assemblywoman Julia Brownley, D-Santa Monica, announced she has introduced a package of bills to improve student outcomes, provide healthier and safer K-12 facilities and hold schools accountable to students and the public.

“We have a moral and economic imperative to create a world-class education system for California,” said Assemblywoman Brownley. “Now is the time to form a master plan of education for moving our system from where it is now to where we want it to be. It starts with overhauling our school finance structure.”

As the newly appointed chairwoman of the Assembly Education Committee, Assemblywoman Brownley said her goal is to close a pernicious achievement gap, boost efficiency and lay the framework for a more significant investment in California’s education system.

“The public needs to clearly see where our education dollars are going and what they are achieving,” Assemblywoman Brownley said.

(Attached is a list of the top education bills Assemblywoman Brownley is carrying. Assemblywoman Brownley will be available for comment on the bills.)

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Assemblywoman Julia Brownley's Top Education Bills for 2009

AB 8 School Finance Reform

Over the last four decades, court mandates and voter initiatives have created an extremely complex, centralized system of school finance that does not work and impedes significant progress in K-12 education in California. A massive Stanford University research projects concluded in 2008 that major school finance reform is imperative. Right now it's impossible for anyone but a few experts to see how much revenue each school district receives or how it is spent. Schools that have similar student populations should receive similar funding, but that's not the case.

AB 8 will convene a working group to develop an alternative, more transparent and accountable system of school finance that is better aligned to the educational needs of students. Once money is invested in a more effective, cleaner system, voters will gain confidence to make greater investments in education.

AB 429 Academic Performance Index Reform

Schools and districts should be held accountable for true growth in students' academic performance over time, but right now they aren't because neither the academic standards nor the annual tests they take were developed for year-to-year comparisons. If these test scores could be linked from year to year, parents would be able to determine if their child's test scores were better or worse than the previous year's scores.

AB 429 will initiate a process to examine potential changes to the annual assessments known as the Academic Performance Index and to the state's assessment system that will use newly available individual student data to make real comparisons of student performance over time. The bill does not mandate these changes, but does require an advisory committee to look into the issues and make recommendations.

AB 821 Clean and Healthy Schools Act

Green products are readily available as alternatives to toxic cleaning products and at no additional cost, yet many schools continue to expose their students and teachers to toxics known to cause asthma, cancer and provoke asthma attacks. Asthma is the primary cause of school absences among chronic illnesses and the leading cause of hospitalization for children under 15 in California. The federal Environmental Protection Agency found half of all schools have poor air quality.

Under AB 821, all public school districts and all private elementary and secondary schools with 50 students or more, shall purchase environmentally preferable and certified cleaning products by the 2010-11 school year. The bill exempts schools who can demonstrate that purchasing green products is not economically feasible. The bill also requires the state to post information on the Internet to help school districts and schools

comply with the greener requirements. Cleaner indoor air in schools has been shown to reduce the incidence of asthma, allergies and absenteeism.

AB 627 Child Nutrition

Almost 20 percent of children between the ages of 2 and 5 are overweight, a condition difficult to reverse in adolescence. According to a recent study, about 20 percent of child care facilities surveyed serve whole milk rather than reduced-fat, 70 percent don't serve water at meals, 62 percent serve whole fruit, but half of those servings are soaked in syrup from cans, and 25 percent don't serve vegetables other than French fries at lunch.

AB 627 will require childcare facilities that receive state funding for meals to meet certain health and nutritional criteria. For example, French fries will be limited to once a week, no sugar or artificially sweetened beverages may be served, sweets such as pastries, cookies and cake may be served only twice a week as snacks only and processed meat such as hot dogs or luncheon meat, must be limited to three times a week.

Childcare facilities that don't receive state funding for meals but are licensed will be required, under AB 627, to serve only milk with 2 percent fat to children over 2 years old, only 100 percent juice just once a day, cereals limited to 6 grams of sugar and at least one vegetable at lunch and dinner. Screen-based entertainment such as computer time, video games and television must be limited to one hour per day and must be educational.

AB 314 Instructional Materials

AB 314 gives school districts greater participation in adopting instructional materials and greater flexibility in purchasing them. The bill will eliminate the duplicative role of the Curriculum Commission in the statewide review of materials and, instead, allow the content review experts and instructional materials reviewers to submit recommendations directly to the state Board of Education. The bill gives school districts the opportunity to submit names of individuals to participate in the review process. Additionally, AB 314 will provide more transparency in the process by requiring reports from expert reviewers on already-approved instructional materials to be made available to school districts and to be posted on the California Department of Education web site. The bill will allow school districts an additional year following adoption to purchase the instructional materials, from the current two-year requirement.

AB 220 Educational Bond

California anticipates an increase in student enrollment of more than 100,000 over the next five years, while overcrowded schools will continue to force youngsters to take long bus rides to facilities outside their neighborhoods. Additionally, many schools were built in the 1950's, are seismically unsafe, costly to operate in terms of energy and need modernization to function fully.

AB 220 would be a vehicle to place a new school construction bond before voters. The measure would put unemployed construction workers back to work, take advantage of cheaper building materials and ensure students have clean, green, safe and sustainable schools they need and deserve. Facility needs, the amount the state will receive through the federal economic stimulus package and California's ability to borrow additional funds will be factors in determining the size of the bond and the election date.

AB 239 Streamlining Teacher Credentials

California faces a shortage of well-qualified teachers, particularly those with credentials to teach math, science and special education. California must produce a globally-competitive workforce to revitalize its economy and attracting well-qualified teachers is an important step toward that goal.

AB 239 will streamline the teacher credentialing process in California, making it much more straightforward for teachers coming in from other states. The bill will allow teachers and counselors who have attained National Board Certification outside of California to qualify for a California credential for their specific field. Teachers who have attained a National Board Certificate to teach English learners would also qualify for the CLAD authorization in California (Cross cultural, Language and Academic Development certificate), which is required to teach English learners. In addition, the bill will remove a sunset date to allow district intern programs to offer the education specialist credential and expand access to teaching programs throughout California.

AB 487 Sale of Obsolete Instructional Materials

Current restrictions on the disposal of surplus or obsolete instructional materials are causing them to be stockpiled in warehouses at an increasing cost to school districts and to no justifiable benefit. The restrictions require the materials to be donated to various public agencies, non-profit charitable organizations and to children or adults to promote literacy, or by sale to organizations agreeing to use the materials solely for educational uses.

AB 487 changes the restrictions on the disposal of instructional materials by allowing districts to sell surplus or obsolete instructional materials and keep 50 percent of the proceeds, with the remainder going to the state to fund additional supplemental instructional materials.

AB 1182 Higher Education Reporting

The University of California, California State University and California Community College systems are required collectively to provide an average of 115 reports annually to the Legislature. Some of the reports are obsolete, duplicative or it's unclear what is required of them.

AB 1182 will eliminate, restructure and reorganize 43 reports and provide clear direction on what is required in them, creating a more manageable system of reporting. It is similar to AB 1821 Asm. Brownley carried last year that passed the Legislature with no opposition, but was vetoed by the governor who noted a drafting error and indicated he had some concerns over mandated costs. Asm. Brownley is working with the governor's office to resolve those concerns with AB 1182.

AB 1195 Child Care Development Programs

The Child Care and Development Services Act requires the state Superintendent of Public Instruction to administer child care and development programs for eligible children from infancy to 13 years of age.

AB 1195 will provide a means for implementing any new federal grant funds from the recently signed federal stimulus package. The bill will require an advisory committee to assist the Department of Education in the development of a plan for using the funds.

AB 572 Charter Schools Conflict of Interest

Recent news reports of a small number of charter school board members engaging in inappropriate financial mismanagement have highlighted the need for charter school conflict of interest laws to be clarified. While charter schools are given more autonomy than public schools, their governing boards, like school district boards, have authority over public funds to be used for the educational benefit of their students, thus, charter school governing boards should be held to the same standard as school district boards. Charter schools, just like all other public schools, should have conflict of interest and open meeting requirements that cast the same light on the financial decisions that they make, so that those decisions are completely transparent to the taxpayers that fund them.

AB 572 will require charter school governing boards to adopt and comply with a conflict of interest policy that is similar to those currently governing school district boards.